

# Kura Huna

THE ART OF REWETI ARAPERE  
by Stephanie Tibble



When Reweti Arapere did art at school, he was told black was a gloomy colour. It made people think of sadness and death. But at university, a teacher talked about Te Pō, the underworld and the night. Reweti already knew that Te Pō was where he could find his tūpuna and the stars. It was the place where everything started. Reweti was reminded that black didn't have just one meaning. If he looked with his Māori eyes, it wasn't a bad colour at all.

## CARDBOARD AND FELT PENS

Reweti has three iwi: Ngāti Raukawa ki te Tonga, Ngāti Tūwharetoa, and Ngāti Porou. When he was born, kōhanga reo and kura kaupapa Māori were still new. He was one of the first students to go to Te Kura Kaupapa Māori o Ōtepeou in Tauranga, and one of his earliest memories of art comes from this time. "I heard noises coming from the shed next door. I looked and saw wood chips on the ground. They came from carvings of tūpuna. I remember wondering why people would do this."

Reweti doesn't make carvings. He much prefers drawing. He draws tūpuna, including atua, using felt pens and cardboard. Many people think these are strange tools for an artist, but Reweti says they help to tell the kind of story he wants to tell. "Felt pens are often used to draw moko on kapa haka performers. The moko represent tūpuna and their stories, an idea I really like, so I decided I'd use felt pens, too." Reweti also likes the way cardboard lasts only a little while. "It reminds us that the future is fragile," he says.



## REAL ART

Reweti has always liked street art. As a boy, he was amazed by the way graffiti artists could own a space with their skilful work. Reweti would've been in big trouble with his parents if he'd ever tagged. Instead, he spent hours and hours practising 3-D lettering. Maybe he'd find a way to use it in his own work one day.

Graffiti is a part of Black American hip-hop culture, something Reweti and his friends related to. "We really liked that some hip-hop crews called themselves after the area code where they lived," Reweti says. "It showed they were proud of where they came from, even a poor suburb. I've always believed in being honest about who you are."

Reweti grew up in Welcome Bay in Tauranga (area code 544). As a teenager, he knew some gifted street artists. He thought their work should be more respected, that people should consider it real art. But who even decided what was real? Going to university helped Reweti think about this. It also helped him to decide what kind of art he would make. He would use his Māori eyes to tell stories from his whakapapa and stories from Aotearoa. For Reweti, these were the stories that mattered. They would be what made his art "real".



## KURA HUNA

There is more to Reweti's art than meets the eye. Some people say his figures look like Transformers, but Reweti calls them pou kāri. They're a bit like 3-D versions of the carved figures in a whareniui. And like a whareniui, Reweti's art has kura huna – hidden treasure. Each piece of treasure has its own meaning.

Everything in Reweti's art helps to tell a story. Reweti's pou kāri often wear caps and sneakers. He's making the point that Māori art isn't stuck in the past. And if you look carefully, there are hidden animals in his work. Reweti also uses kōwhaiwhai patterns that reflect different life forms, including the birds of Tāne and the fish of Tangaroa. But he doesn't like the word "decoration" to describe these patterns. He says that kōwhaiwhai, such as mangōpare (the fighting hammerhead shark), are much more than decorations. He describes them as dream-like patterns that help an artist connect with the natural world.

Te reo Māori is another big part of Reweti's work. Sometimes he makes up words to describe his art, like kamo-whaiwhai (from "camouflage" and "kōwhaiwhai"). Kamo-whaiwhai is Reweti's own kind of kōwhaiwhai art. He uses patterns and colour to suggest the clothing of Tāne-mahuta as well as the connection between people and the land.



## RANGIMATUA

Reweti's biggest artwork is called Rangimatua – a giant 3-D tiki made from cardboard boxes. Rangimatua is in the Dowse Art Museum in Lower Hutt. When Reweti was asked to make the work, he researched the place where it would go. It was a huge room. In the room next door, there was an important pātaka called Nuku Tewhatewha. "I liked the idea that Nuku Tewhatewha would be looking at my work," he says, "reminding us of the past."

The name Rangimatua is made up of rangi, which means the sky, and matua, which means father or uncle. When he began making Rangimatua, Reweti was about to become a father. He thought about what this was going to be like and about the men who had helped him to grow up.

Reweti had to find giant boxes to make his pou kāri. In the end, he had them sent from a factory in Wellington. "I kept these enormous boxes in my tiny railway house in Palmerston North," he says. "They filled my entire lounge." Reweti says it was pretty chaotic having all these boxes and a new baby in the house. "My son learnt to walk around Rangimatua!"

People are amazed by the size and detail of Reweti's extraordinary pou kāri. Rangimatua stands tall and strong like a shelter. It includes lots of kura huna: kōwhaiwhai, huia, and words. These kura huna help Reweti tell the story of Rangimatua using his Māori eyes. The space between the legs is another part of the artwork's story. "I made this space just high enough for my son to walk through," Reweti says. "It's like an archway to the future. I like to include things about the past, the present, and the future."





## URBAN KĀINGA

In 2009, Reweti was asked to take part in an exhibition in Wellington. The exhibition, at the City Gallery, was called Urban Kāinga. Various artists would show what this idea meant to them. Reweti made new kamo-whaiwhai figures. He bought new sneakers for the opening. He met other artists and was even on the te reo Māori news programme *Te Karere*. He says his mum was proud to see him on the telly.

Because of the City Gallery exhibition, Reweti was invited to a big arts festival in New Mexico. He was a special guest of the tangata whenua. Reweti admired the way local artists mixed old and new ideas. He also liked their cardboard boxes! He even put a label from one, “Hecho en Mexico” (made in Mexico), in the mouth of one of his cardboard tiki. “My carving tūpuna once put patterns on tongues,” Reweti says. “So this was my own version of old and new.”

## THE WHAKAPAPA CIRCLE

Reweti says whakapapa is a circle: each generation experiences many of the same things, and many stories are retold. The traditions that influence Reweti’s art are part of this circle, like the carvers in his whakapapa. “Before tūpuna Māori knew how to tattoo, the patterns they drew on skin could be washed off,” he says. The knowledge of tā moko was brought to people by a tupuna called Mataora. Tā moko doesn’t wash off. After careful thought, Reweti decided to receive a tā moko on his face, called a Mataora. If you look closely, you’ll see kura huna from his art.

Reweti’s grateful that he went to Māori-language schools. He says, “It helped me develop my own special way of seeing the world.” Reweti uses his art to share this way of seeing. He wants people to know that you can tell your stories in your own way, using whatever you’ve got. “For me, working with cardboard was a happy accident,” he says, “but it shows your best materials can sometimes be the ones in your rubbish bin.”

Reweti says that making art comes with responsibility. “You have to look after the special stories you’re telling.” But he loves the way art can make people think in a deeper way. “This is what my tūpuna used art for, too.” Reweti says he’ll always retell the old stories, but he’ll also tell new ones. It’s all about keeping the circle going.



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